

## **Barnahus:**

Improving the response to  
child sexual abuse in  
England

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## Introduction

In England, it is estimated that only 1 in 8 victims of child sexual abuse are identified by the authorities<sup>1</sup>. Children who disclose that they have been sexually abused face multiple interviews with social workers, the police and medical professionals in a variety of settings. Interviews are often the only source of evidence in sexual abuse cases, yet for many children the interviews led by the police do not enable them to provide the best possible evidence<sup>2</sup>. Repeat interviews can be confusing and cause children, particularly young children, to give inconsistent evidence which, in many cases, will lead to the perpetrator not being charged. Children can be traumatised by having to give an account of their abuse to multiple professionals in multiple locations. They can also then face long waiting lists to access specialist therapeutic support<sup>3</sup>.

The current system is not child-centred, and does not achieve the best results, either for children or the criminal justice system. We have identified a possible way forward in the Barnahus (children's house) model in use in Iceland. Since its introduction in 1998, the Barnahus has delivered compelling results – a trebling of the number of perpetrators charged, a doubling of the number of convictions, and better therapeutic outcomes for children and their families. This paper outlines the potential of the model for substantially improving the response to child sexual abuse in England.

## Barnahus overview

*"From the onset of Barnahus twice as many cases of suspected sexual abuse have been investigated, the number of cases prosecuted has tripled and the same applies to the number of sentences passed on a yearly basis. This I believe is largely due to the fact that the evidential quality of children's disclosure has significantly improved".*

***Bragi Guðbrandsson, General Director, Barnaverndarstofa/ The Government Agency for Child Protection, Iceland***

The Barnahus was established in Iceland in 1998. The Child Protection Service in Iceland recognised that multiple agencies were holding cases of suspected sexual abuse, but information-sharing and coordination were poor. Young victims were required to give multiple interviews to professionals from each agency, damaging the reliability of the evidence they were able to provide, and were being traumatised by having to give

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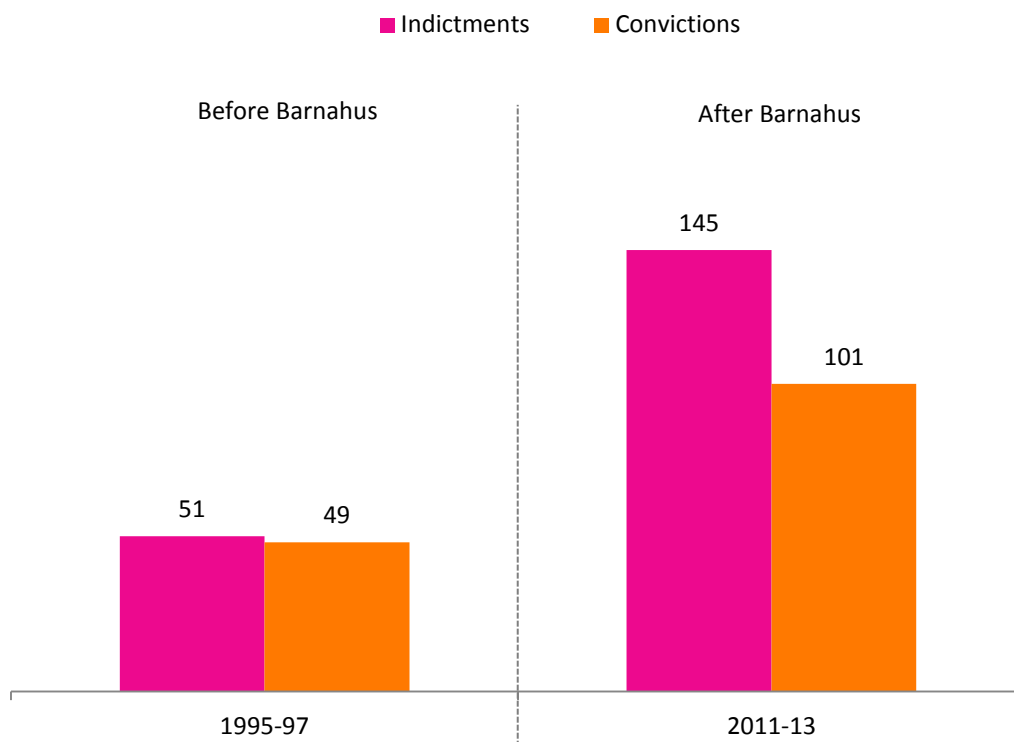
1 Protecting Children from Harm – a critical assessment of child sexual abuse in the family network, Children's Commissioner, 2015

2 Achieving Best Evidence in Child Sexual Abuse Cases – a joint inspection, HMCPSI and HMIC, 2014

3 It's Time – campaign report, NSPCC, 2016

testimony in court. Consequently, few suspected perpetrators were charged and convicted, and victims were not adequately supported to recover from the trauma of sexual abuse.

There are approximately 600 cases of CSA each year in Iceland, around half of which involve children under the age of 15 who are referred to the Barnahus for interview (unpublished data provided by Icelandic Child Protection Agency). Since the introduction of the model, the number of cases of child sexual abuse where the alleged perpetrator is charged has increased considerably. In the period 1995-97, there were 51 indictments in sexual abuse cases and 49 convictions. By the period 2011-2013, there were 145 indictments and 101 convictions<sup>4</sup>. More cases have gone to court and more perpetrators have been convicted since the introduction of the model.



\*Based on aggregated figures provided by Icelandic Child Protection Service

Following a visit to Iceland in April this year to improve understanding of the Barnahus and its potential application in England, this paper summarises the principles of the model and outlines the expected benefits of its introduction.

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4 Review of pathway following sexual assault for children and young people in London, The Havens, Kings College Hospital London, 2015

## Principles and benefits

Inspired by children's advocacy centres in the USA, the Barnahus model was established as a child-centred response to sexual abuse. There are a number of important aspects of the design and function of the Barnahus which support victims of sexual abuse in the criminal justice process.

### A home-like setting

After suspected victims of sexual abuse are referred to the Barnahus by the Child Protection Service, all services are delivered under one roof, including the forensic interview, medical examination and child/family therapy. The Barnahus is an unmarked residential property, situated in a typical street which has been designed to be non-threatening and child-friendly. By undertaking the interview, medical examination and providing therapeutic support in a familiar and non-threatening setting, the anxiety felt by children is minimised. Children associate police stations with individuals who have broken the law, and medical facilities with being sick or unwell. The Barnahus has no negative associations for children, enabling victims of abuse to feel as comfortable as possible when interacting with professionals.

### Helping victims disclose abuse

Many victims of abuse do not disclose until adulthood, or wait a considerable period after the abuse has occurred until telling someone. In the Commissioner's survey of adult survivors of sexual abuse, many respondents stated that they did not disclose that they had been sexually abused owing to a lack of opportunity and not having the words/language to describe abuse<sup>5</sup>. Some survivors said that they were 'desperate' for someone to ask them what was wrong.

Children are referred to the Barnahus by the Child Protection Service when they exhibit some sign or symptom suggestive of sexual abuse. During this exploratory interview, a child psychotherapist trained in forensic interviewing can work with the child to elicit a disclosure of abuse in a non-leading manner. The exploratory interview provides the opportunity for the child to disclose abuse, and enables authorities to intervene early. Even younger children, who might otherwise find it difficult to make a clear verbal disclosure of abuse, can be supported by the forensic interviewer to describe what has happened to them.

As a result, more victims of abuse are identified and provided with the help and support required to recover from the abuse they have experienced. In 2014, approximately 48% of

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<sup>5</sup> Protecting Children from Harm – a critical assessment of child sexual abuse in the family network, Children's Commissioner, 2015

exploratory interviews resulted in a disclosure of sexual abuse (unpublished data provided by Icelandic Child Protection Agency). There is no parallel process in England led by a forensic interviewer.

### **A minimal number of interviews conducted by child-expert staff**

Most cases of child sexual abuse do not involve any physical evidence<sup>6</sup>. The only evidence available to demonstrate that abuse has occurred is the testimony provided by the victim. It is therefore imperative that the child is supported to provide a full account during interview, in a manner which elicits the necessary information but minimises the likelihood that the child will be traumatised by the experience.

Interviews are conducted at the Barnahus by qualified clinical child psychotherapists, trained in forensic interviewing. There are two types of interview (i) *exploratory*, where the child has not made a direct disclosure of abuse, but has nonetheless exhibited signs and symptoms which suggest that sexual abuse may have occurred, and (ii) *investigative*, where the child has disclosed sexual abuse. As far as possible, professionals at the Barnahus aim to minimise the number of interviews with the child. This is to minimise re-traumatisation caused by repeatedly giving the same story and improve the evidential quality of the child's account by eliminating the possibility of the account changing through repeated interviews.

The exploratory interview is a formal process which provides a safe space in which children are supported to disclose abuse in a non-leading manner. Where a child discloses during an exploratory interview, the interview is stopped so that the alleged perpetrator can be taken into custody. An investigative interview is convened as soon as possible. Interviewers are trained to work with very young children.

Investigative interviews are observed via video link by a range of professionals, including the police, child protection service, prosecutor, defence solicitor, judge and the child's state appointed legal representative. Professionals communicate with the interviewer via an earpiece, and they relay questions in a child-friendly manner consistent with the principles of forensic interviewing. The investigative interview is carried out as soon as possible following referral to the Barnahus.

### **Improved evidence through reduced the need for children to testify in court**

Giving repeated accounts of the abuse diminishes the quality of the evidence<sup>7</sup>. Disclosures

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Protecting Children from Harm – a critical assessment of child sexual abuse in the family network, Children's Commissioner, 2015

may vary in detail from one account to another, which may be taken to suggest that the evidence is unreliable, when this variance should instead be attributed to trauma and diminished recall. Children are also subject to cross-examination in court. Victims of sexual abuse have repeatedly highlighted that cross examination by defence barristers is extremely traumatic. Pre-recorded testimony is a considerable advantage in this regard<sup>8</sup>.

The criminal justice process is embedded within the Barnahus. The recorded interview serves as testimony for the court, with few children under the age of 15 being required to give evidence in person. This improves the quality of the evidence available to the court. Typically, the court case is heard 6 months following the interview. Given that the investigative interview serves as testimony, there is no question of diminished recall and inconsistency with previous accounts given to professionals. As far as possible, the same judge leads the interview and the court process.

The Ministry of Justice has piloted pre-recorded cross-examination in England as a means of minimising the trauma experienced by victims of abuse<sup>9</sup>. Results of this pilot are expected imminently. However, the Barnahus goes one step further, as the interview also serves as the court testimony. There is no need for further questioning at all. Only the forensic interviewer questions the child, and the defence attorney has an opportunity to put questions to the child via the interviewer during the investigative interview. This approach minimises the trauma experienced by the child and improves the quality of the evidence.

### **Guaranteed and rapid access to therapy for abused children**

The Barnahus model is based on the principle that undertaking the interview and providing support quickly will improve criminal justice and therapeutic outcomes for victims of sexual abuse. By interviewing the child immediately upon referral to the Barnahus, it is less likely that they will forget important information regarding their abuse which may be crucial evidence. It is also possible to provide therapeutic support much more quickly.

In 2014, approximately 50% of referrals to the Barnahus led to court testimony being recorded in less than a week. A further 30% of referrals resulted in court testimony within 1-2 weeks. In each case, the child and their family is offered therapy immediately following the interview, enabling the process of recovery to be without delay (unpublished data provided by Icelandic Child Protection Agency).

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8 Child sexual exploitation and the response to localised grooming – second report of the session 2013-14, House of Commons Home Affairs Committee

9 “First victims spared harrowing court room under pre-recorded evidence pilot”, Ministry of Justice, 28 April 2014

There is no question of therapy contaminating the testimony of the child, as the testimony has already been captured and recorded through the investigative interview. Victims and non-abusing parents/carers are offered therapy even where the standard of proof required to convict the alleged perpetrator cannot be met.

## Adoption and adaptation in other countries

Since its inception in 1998 in Iceland, the Barnahus model has been adapted and implemented in a number of other countries. Agencies in Sweden, Norway and Denmark have all tailored the model to their particular social, legal and political context.

In Sweden, there are now over 30 ‘children’s houses’, with the development of each led by the relevant local agencies<sup>10</sup>. No changes to primary legislation were required to enable the development of children’s houses. ‘Quality standards’ have been introduced to manage and maintain consistency in the function and operation of children’s houses. Evaluation has demonstrated that children and families’ experiences of the criminal justice process have been improved<sup>11</sup>, police and social services work more closely together, and the quality of investigations has been improved<sup>12</sup>.

In Norway, a Barnahus has been established in each police district<sup>13</sup>. The interviews are conducted by police officers specialising in forensic interviewing. There are no exploratory interviews in the Norway model – this phase is instead conducted by social workers, who then refer cases for investigative interview to the Barnahus. The investigative interview is conducted in two stages – (i) an initial detailed interview, which determines whether there is evidence to charge a perpetrator; and (ii) a supplementary interview, undertaken following an interview with the perpetrator and in which the interviewer does not repeat the same questions, but instead focuses on discrepancies in the account and enables elaboration to improve the quality of the evidence. Evaluation of the Barnahus model in Norway has demonstrated that children who are interviewed by the police in the Barnahus receive better care than those interviewed at a police station. The Barnahus model has also led to greater coordination among professionals and an increase in awareness of CSA in the general population<sup>14</sup>.

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10 Guðbrandsson, B “Barnahus – Children’s House – a child-friendly, interdisciplinary and multiagency response to child abuse and services for child victims”, The European Forum on the Rights of the Child, Brussels, 3 -4th June 2015

11 Rasmusson, B 2010 “Children’s advocacy centers (Barnahus) in Sweden – experiences of children and parents”, Child Indicators Research, 4 (2), 301-321

12 Kaldal, A “Child evidence – a comparative study on handling, protection and testing evidence in legal proceedings within states in the Baltic Sea Region”, Strasbourg, 20th April 2015

13 Ibid

14 Kaldal, A “Child evidence – a comparative study on handling, protection and testing evidence in legal proceedings within states in the Baltic Sea Region”, Strasbourg, 20th April 2015



The model has also been adapted and implemented in Denmark as part of a package of substantial reform. Local authorities in each region are mandated in legislation to refer child sexual abuse cases to their Barnahus within 7 days. Forensic interviewing is led by the police, and quality standards have been established to ensure a consistent level of service, and the Barnahus facilities are required to cooperate on a national level to share experiences and learning.

## Implications for England

*"The Barnahus model represents an exciting and innovative multi-agency initiative whereby all partners work together to gather evidence from a child victim of sexual assault in the least intrusive way, providing a strong and accessible network of support to enable the child to move forward from such a traumatic incident".*

***Detective Chief Superintendent Keith Niven, Sexual Offences, Exploitation and Child Abuse Command, Metropolitan Police Service***

The Barnahus model has considerable potential for England. It demonstrably overcomes many of the key challenges for agencies responding to child sexual abuse by:

- offering a safe space for children who demonstrate the signs and symptoms of abuse to disclose to professionals;
- ensuring that children are interviewed in a manner which minimises traumatisation and maximises the evidential value of their account;
- embedding the criminal justice process in the Barnahus and so eliminating the need for traumatic cross-examination; and
- enabling children to access therapeutic support rapidly and in a child-friendly location.

Although some upfront investment in the development and implementation of the Barnahus model would be necessary, these services are already largely delivered by

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Bakketeig, Berg, Myklebust & Stefansen 2012, Barnehusvalueringen 2012, delrapport 1. Barnehusmodellens implikasjoner for politiets arbeid med fokus på dommeravhør og rettsmedisinsk undersøkelse. [The Barnahus evaluation study, part 1: The implications of the Barnahus model for the work of the police, particularly the forensic interview and the forensic medical examination] Oslo: Politihøgskolen, rapport nr. 6/2012

Stefansen, Gundersen & Bakketeig 2012, Barnehusvalueringen 2012, delrapport 2. En undersøkelse blant barn og pårørende, samarbeidspartnere, ledere og ansatte. [The Barnahus evaluation study, part 2. The experiences of children, care-takers, co-operating partners, Barnahus leaders and staff]. Oslo: NOVA, rapport nr. 9/2012

statutory agencies, including police interviewing, therapeutic support and medical examination. The Barnahus model simply requires a single, child friendly location in which all services can be co-located delivered to greater effect.

As experiences in Sweden, Denmark and Norway demonstrate, the model can be adapted to the needs of different legal systems. For example, some aspects of the Barnahus model that would need to be considered in more detail prior to implementation in England include:

- **Exploratory interviews.** The significant percentage of exploratory interviews in Barnahus which yield disclosures of abuse demonstrates the value of forensic interviews of children, conducted by child psychotherapists, where there is a suspicion of abuse. In England, it is necessary for a child to be ‘at significant risk of harm’ in order to interview them without parental consent. By definition, it would not be clear whether there is a significant risk of harm unless a disclosure is made during an exploratory interview. Consequently, it would be necessary to obtain the consent of parents to conduct an exploratory interview. However, it is the experience of the Icelandic Child Protection Service that parents generally consent to their child being subject to an exploratory interview at the Barnahus.
  
- **Pre/post charge interviews.** Investigative interviews in the Barnahus also serve as court testimony. They are undertaken after the alleged perpetrator is charged with an offence and before they have been indicted. The alleged perpetrator therefore has legal representation and is able to contribute to the forensic interview via video link/earpiece. Consequently, it is necessary to interview the child only once. However, in England, the decision to charge an alleged perpetrator is taken according to the evidential test (whether there is sufficient evidence against the defendant for a realistic prospect of conviction) and the public interest test (whether prosecution is in the public interest, including consequences for the victim). The decision to charge the perpetrator may rest upon the quality of the evidence available from an interview with the victim. In order for an interview to also serve as court testimony, with an opportunity for the alleged perpetrator’s legal representative to put questions to the victim via the forensic interviewer, it would be necessary to charge the perpetrator first. A minimum of two interviews would therefore be necessary in many cases.

## Conclusion

It is clear that the Barnahus represents a truly child-centred approach to child sexual abuse. Services are designed and administered in a manner consistent with the best possible criminal justice and therapeutic outcomes, and the results obtained are extremely impressive.

Experiences in Sweden, Norway and Denmark demonstrate that the model can be adapted and implemented within the legal framework of another country, without compromising the core principles which deliver such impressive results. It is now time for commissioners in England to look at how the model can be piloted here and adapted to our own legal system so as to help improve rates of prosecution and, ultimately, outcomes for children.

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